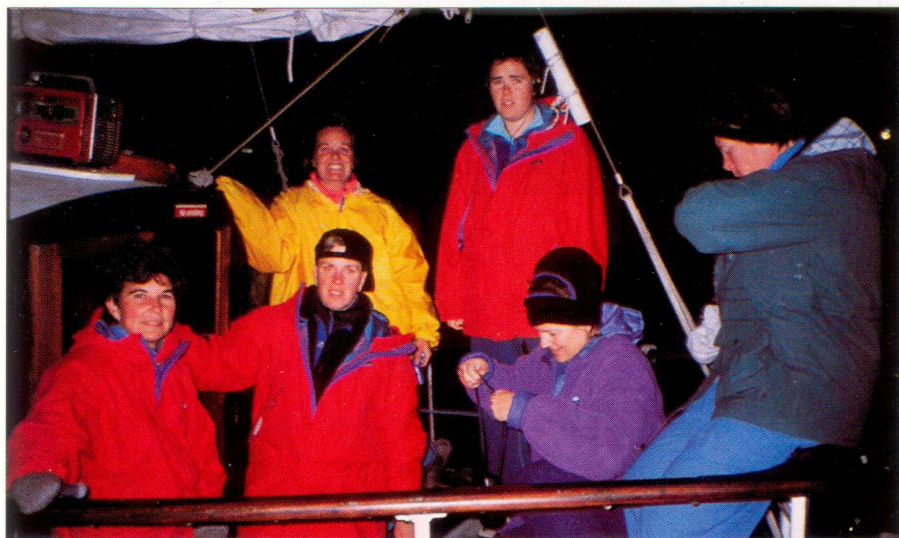


Channeling COURAGE

By Sandra Todd



*The Danskin Channelers
on the boat in Dover Harbor
before the Channel swim. Left to
right, (front row): Pam Derks, 38;
Mag Donaldson, 45; Bonnie Winn,
47; Pat McGarvey, 45. Back row:
Suzie Dods, 31; Laura Burtch, 28.*

The Royal British Navy team was three hours from finishing at the French shore of Cap Gris Nez when the Danskin Channelers, homebound after 10 hours and 41 minutes in the Granddaddy of them all, crossed their path in the unforgiving 59-degree chop.

The seasick American women, relieved to be finished and too nauseous to imagine the champagne corks that soon would fly, watched the military contingent with empathy. The two groups had set off

virtually together from Dover, England's Shakespeare Beach in the wee-hours of what seemed like a day that would never end.

"You might as well pack it in mates!" teased Team Danskin's pilot Dave Whyte. The haggard-looking men on the Navy boat waved unenthusiastically, pondering how the women had finished so far ahead of Her Majesty's finest.

The team of six women from northern California, however, didn't have the heart or energy to join their captain's heckling. They could manage only to whisper their own private thank yous to the Channel Gods for letting them out alive. The infamous 21.5-mile stretch of English Channel yawned and tossed the boat and its Yankee passengers back

toward Dover's trademark cliffs. It was over for the time being.

Goal #1: Accomplished. They had finished.

Goal #2: Accomplished. They had eclipsed by 13 minutes the women's American record for relay swimming in the Channel.

Goal #3. Nearly accomplished. They had come respectably close to the women's world record of 9 hours 58 minutes, a mark that had been set by a Polish women's relay just seven days earlier. The Polish women were fortunate to swim prior to the storm that turned the Channel into what one of the American swimmers described as something akin to a "non-stop ride on the Santa Cruz roller-coaster." In fact, on September 1 when the American team arrived in England, 70-m.p.h. winds claimed the airspace over the water they were to swim in. Although the Eastern European group swam in mild weather, they were beset with the danger of encountering stinging jellyfish, guardians of the pass between England and France.

Dipping into the Channel's crashing, frothy swells at 4:29 a.m. below the bleached crags of Dover might sound romantic, like a scene out of

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"From Here to Eternity." But these ladies, these English Channel American record holders, will look at you sideways if you have the audacity to suggest such a fluffed description.

The sea's foamy wash was cold, but it didn't figure as a major obstacle for the team. Seasickness did, however. For nearly 11 hours, that romantic surf blew out at around 12 feet high, rocking and tumbling the swimmers' stomachs and equilibrium tortuously—whether in or out of the water. As a result, their previous discussions and careful planning for nutrition during the swim proved as pointless as a dull knife.

"When you're on the boat throwing up for hours at a time waiting to swim your next hour, courage factors into the picture," said Mag Donaldson, 45, one of the six swimmers. Another swimmer, Pat McGarvey, 45, who helped organize the event, remained seasick for two days after the swim.

The Danskin Channelers hail from the San Francisco Bay Swimming Club, an organization which, ironically, would not allow women as members 10 years ago. The swimmers are all masters-age competitors, ranging from Bonnie Winn, at 47 the oldest member of the team, to 28-year-old Laura Burtch, the team's "baby." In between are Donaldson and McGarvey, both 45; Pam Derks, 38; and Suzanne Dods, 31. Their reasons for rising to such a challenge were varied, with one common denominator: "Older" women have not traditionally attempted what they accomplished.

"I think we all kept going because of the challenge and because of the team," reflected Donaldson, who was nicknamed "Corky" by her teammates for her bobber-like portions of the swim. "But there was something larger at work in all of us. For me, part of the reason to get back in that water was to show that there's no reason why you have to stop doing things just because you're getting older. We aren't Diana Nyads or Janet Evanses, but we can set goals and meet them."

A solo swimmer and an Australian relay joined the Brits and

Danskin team early in the day for the attempt, but both quit about two hours into the swim. The Royal British Navy and Bay group were the lone finishers.

"We had a fabulous course," said Donaldson, praising Whyte's navigational skill. The only thing that held us back was the *condition* of the course. "Whyte, as much a component of the U.S. relay's success as the swimmers themselves, and

pilot for the Polish team the week before, called during the late afternoon of Sept. 3 and told Donaldson and crew they should be ready to swim the next day. "But he called back two hours later to say that we couldn't do it because of a storm," she explained. As it turned out, Whyte gave the swimmers two options on Sept. 4.

"There was a window estimated at 10 hours on the next day following the first storm and before another was due to roll in," Donaldson said. "It actually turned out to be

more like six hours. Dave told us that if we went it wasn't going to be great conditions, that we could wait if we wanted to. But we wanted to go, so in order to hit the tides right and miss the second storm, we left early in the morning on the 5th. The conditions were still abominable." Apparently, it's been a poor season for most all Channel swim attempts. Whyte, who normally guides around 20 individuals and relay teams per season (early spring through Oct. 1), counted the U.S. team as only his tenth.

Danskin sponsored the team with swimsuits, hotel accommodations and board during their stay. Patagonia, an outdoor-wear manufacturer and retailer, designed a three-layer clothing system to help the athletes maintain warmth on the boat between swims.

"It's the hardest thing I've ever done," Donaldson said. "Mentally and physically. I felt I had no control. I remember looking up and many times not being able to see the pilot boat because the waves were so high. The odd thing is that I think every one of us would go back and do it again." □



The Channel team lines up in their training waters, Aquatic Park, San Francisco. Left to right: Burtch, Winn, Dods, Derks, Donaldson, McGarvey. Their reasons for rising to the Channel swimming challenge were varied, with one common denominator: "Older" women have not traditionally attempted what they accomplished.